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**Placing Caster Semenya Within and Outside of Discourse on Sex and Gender in the Space
of International Professional Athletics**

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Abstract

World Champion and Olympic Gold Medalist Caster Semenya's body has caused a rupture within the space of international professional athletics, which is structured according to a binary conceptualization of sex and gender. This rupture created a space for international discourse about alternative ways in which sex and gender can be defined, and to reimagine the space of international professional athletics, and other binary-bound non-sport spaces, to be more inclusive. Cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove's concept of landscapes and Stuart Hall's concept of coding and decoding provide a framework for exploring how Caster Semenya's body has been read and interpreted like a landscape, and how her competitive performances have been portrayed, by United States media. While discourse exploring Semenya's body-landscape has offered the opportunity to decenter the concepts of sex and gender, this discourse has been used to affirm the hegemonic ideology of sex and gender as binary, leaving Semenya in a liminal and silenced space of the "abnormal."

When Caster Semenya decisively won the women's 800 meter race at the 2009 World Athletics Championship an international debate ensued. Semenya's exceptional speed and non-normative female appearance raised questions about her eligibility to compete as a female athlete. Semenya's body caused a rupture within the space of international professional athletics, which is structured according to a binary conceptualization of sex and gender. This rupture created a space for international discourse about alternative ways in which sex and gender can be defined. However, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) has been unable to agree on how to define sex and gender and the debate continues in international media over eight years later. While discourse exploring Semenya's body-landscape has offered the opportunity to decenter the concepts of sex and gender, this discourse has been used to affirm the hegemonic ideology of sex and gender as binary, leaving Semenya in a liminal space of the "abnormal". Semenya's body is simultaneously "abnormal" because it is not womanly enough and "abnormal" because it is too exceptional for a woman.

Semenya's body has been explored, read, and interpreted by the media as one might analyze a landscape. Cosgrove remarks as he strolls and observes the landscape of his town one morning,

the same scene could be found almost anywhere in England. Change the names of the stores and then the scene would be typical of much of Western Europe and North America. Geographers might take an interest in the place because it occupies the peak rent location of the town, they might study the frontage widths or goods on offer as part

of a retail study, or they might assess its impact on the pre-existing urban morphology.
(Cosgrove 177)

Similarly, each human body shares common components and similar features, with some variations in components and topography from person to person. What makes any single body-landscape of interest, and why?

Ariel Levy of *The New Yorker* explains, “there is much more at stake in organizing sports by gender than just making things fair. If we were to admit that at some level we don’t know the difference between men and women, we might start to wonder about the way we’ve organized our entire world” (Levy). The current competitive structure of athletics requires Semenya to identify as a man or a woman order to compete. There is no alternative. This same decision is made the day a child is born in the United States; a birth certificate has two options, male or female. If the space of international professional athletics was reconstructed to be inclusive of non-binary sex and gender identities, how would this affect non-sport spaces that are structured as binary? Semenya’s body-landscape has created a space in which such possibilities can be discussed.

Semenya’s body-landscape can be viewed from multiple perspectives, each of which are shaped by the viewer’s experiences. Consequently, there cannot be a singular way to define sex or gender, but rather there are countless ways in which sex and gender can be understood. Stuart Hall explains that,

A ‘raw’ historical event cannot, *in that form*, be transmitted by, say, a television newscast. Events can only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual discourse. In the moment when a historical event passes under the sign of discourse, it is subject of all the complex formal ‘rules’ by which language signifies. To put it

paradoxically, the event must become a 'story' before it can become a *communicative event*. (Hall 478)

Semenya's 2009 World Athletics Championship win is a "'raw' historical event" which does not have an inherent meaning. However, media has turned this race into stories that convey a variety of perspectives and demonstrate the inability of the media, as well as the IAAF, to reach a consensus about how to determine Semenya's sex and gender. Taking into account the diverse perspectives and dimensions of sex and gender that have been presented in this discourse, the structure of sex and gender as a binary can no longer remain intact.

The media has published numerous articles about Semenya since her 2009 debut on the world stage at the World Athletics Championship in Berlin. Cooky et al. collected articles published within the five months following Semenya's 2009 victory from 13 major national and regional newspapers in the U. S., totaling 53 articles (38). There wasn't a single American athlete competing in this race. However, Cosgrove points out, "much of the symbolism of landscape ... serves the purpose of reproducing cultural norms and establishing the values of dominant groups across all of society" (180). U. S. media discourse about Semenya's body-landscape demonstrates expectations of which characteristics determine if a body is a woman or if a body is a man, both in terms of physical characteristics as well as physical abilities.

McRuer states, "'normal' carries with it a history of discursive and literal violence against those who could never hope to be described by the term" (McRuer 46). Semenya has demonstrated outstanding physical ability for a female 800m runner; she is a world champion and Olympic gold medalist. However, Semenya deviates from what is considered the "normal" threshold of ability for female runners, and she possess physical characteristics that are not "normal" for a female. This has provided the grounds for her to be subjected to suspicion of her

qualification to compete among women and spurred on-going international public deliberation about her sex and gender.

American journalists' descriptions of Semenya's body-landscape paint a picture that affirms the expectation that strength, power, speed and muscularity are masculine characteristics (Miller 298, Cooky et al. 41, Bederman 15). Oppositely, female athletes are expected to exemplify beauty, glamour, and sex appeal, despite their pursuit of "masculine" skills (Miller 296, Cooky et al. 41, Vannini and Fornssler 245). Bearak of *The New York Times* described Semenya as "a muscular, husky-voiced 18-year-old" (Bearak A6), while Epstein of *Sports Illustrated* asserted that "her time-not to mention her deep voice, ripped physique and narrow hips-had observers openly questioning her womanhood" (Epstein). Both of these journalists comment on Semenya's voice, which is irrelevant to her athletic performance, but is associated with masculinity. Although Semenya is a professional athlete and therefore would be expected to be very toned, the journalists emphasize her muscularity as a demonstration of her masculinity. Levy of *The New Yorker* stated, "Semenya is breathtakingly butch. Her torso is like the chest plate on a suit of armor. She has a strong jawline, and a build that slides straight from her ribs to her hips" (Levy). Levy does not describe Semenya's impressively fast race as "breathtaking" but rather the fact that she has masculine characteristics. Like Epstein, Levy emphasizes the narrowness of her hips, and adds that her torso is comparable to "a suit of armor"; her body is too chiseled to be a "normal" female, she lacks feminine curves. Journalists also quoted Semenya's coach, who stated, "I feel like she was too powerful for ladies" (Levy). To be a successful competitive track athlete, especially at the international level, one must be physically powerful. However, this quote suggests that Semenya's physical ability exceeds the threshold of what can be expected of female athletes.

Vannini and Fornssler explain that “the female sporting body is formed through what it lacks in comparison to the excess, or normalization of excess, found of the male” (Vannini and Fornssler 252). The aforementioned descriptions express that Semenya’s body demonstrates exemplary strength, power, speed and muscularity. Rather than being praise-worthy however, these characteristics are a reason for suspicion because Semenya possesses the qualities to a degree that is beyond the threshold of what is expected for “normal” female athletes.

Where is the line for allowable female ability drawn? Does policing the space of international professional athletics for athletes who violate the boundaries of “normal” male and female performance create a fair competitive environment, or does it limit the potential for female athletes’ achievements? How can women aspire to achieve new levels of athletic accomplishment if there is a line drawn to delineate women’s physical abilities? How muscular and how fast can a woman be before she is no longer allowed to compete as a woman? Who has the authority to determine these limitations?

While scientists have attempted to establish a method of testing to determine sex and gender, U.S. media discourse has addressed many ways in which scientific tests cannot provide sufficient evidence to determine a person’s sex and gender in binary terms. Epstein of *Sports Illustrated* suggests the impossibility of a resolution based in science by quoting Myron Genel, a member of the IAAF committee that made the initial decision against the effectiveness of chromosome testing, and professor emeritus of pediatrics at Yale. Genel stated, ““You’d have to run international competitions like the Westminster dog show, with competitions for every breed.”” (Epstein) This comparison of human variability to dog breeds suggests that shifting the athletic competition structure from two categories to a multiplicity of categories is ridiculous. What Genel does not acknowledge however is that humans have many characteristics, several of

which confer athletic advantage, that do exist in a multiplicity of variations. Vannini and Fornssler provide the example of height, which “would not be used to disqualify a competitor from high jump competitions because height is understood to be a ‘normal’ or ‘naturally occurring’ variation” (252). Levy of *The New York Times* pointed out, “Michael Phelps, who has won fourteen Olympic gold medals, has unusually long arms and is said to have double-joined elbows, knees, and ankles” (Levy). These points raise multiple considerations. Why is variation in height, or in arm length “normal”? Notably, these characteristics are measured on a broad scale, rather than either/or, or have/lack. Additionally, sex and gender are not directly associated with these characteristics. One could say that men are on average taller than women, but it is widely acknowledged that there are frequent exceptions to this statement. It is also important to note that in the case of Phelps, he is a male athlete. There is no threshold of athletic achievement that he can exceed that would cause suspicion of whether he is qualified to compete as a male. Rather his exceptional achievements raise the bar of possibility for what male athletes can achieve.

Semenya’s body-landscape has created a space for this on-going discourse, and has continues to challenge the IAAF to re-evaluate the limitations of the current categorization of bodies within international competitive athletics. The IAAF has been unable to resolve questions that were raised by Semanya’s race in 2009, and given no alternatives, Semanya has since been allowed to continue to compete as a woman, though not without continued scrutiny. Journalists, readers, competitors, family members, and coaches have all been a part of the discourse investigating Semanya’s “abnormal” body-landscape and constructing their own conceptualizations of what determines sex and gender. However, in the midst of this cacophony, Semanya’s voice is nearly non-existent (Cooky et al. 46). The quotes from Semanya that are

included in U.S. media make no assertion about her identity. These quotes include, “I took the lead in the 400 meters and I killed them, they couldn’t follow. I celebrated the last 200 because I knew, man” (Bearak A6), and “Oh, man, I don’t know what to say. It’s pretty good to win a gold medal and bring it home.’... ‘I didn’t know I could win that race, but for the first time in my life the experience, the World Championships. . .’... ‘I couldn’t believe it, man” (Levy). If Semenya did make a statement about her sex and gender, what would be the result? If she states that she is a woman, the scrutiny will continue. If she claims that she is a man, her professional career would be ended. Despite her exceptional performance in women’s competitions, her achievement is not at the level of World Championship-level and Olympic-level male athletes. If Semenya identifies by neither of these categories, there is no space for her to participate in competitive athletics at any level.

In response to an article by Alice Dreger in *The New York Times* in 2009 titled “Sex Verification: More Complicated Than X’s and Y’s”, one reader wrote, “Just because she considers herself a woman doesn’t mean she qualifies for female-specific athlete competition. That is why we need a panel of experts to decide. It is invasive but necessary to maintain athletic integrity” (“Semenya Case: Complex Issues and Simple Fairness”). This statement suggests that Semenya should not be the one to claim her own sex or gender, but rather the decision should be made by ‘experts’. As McRuer states, “normal ways of being and living have generally been accorded a privacy denied to abnormal lives” (McRuer 187). Semenya’s “abnormal” achievement on the track has entitled not only athletic authorities and scientists, but also the public, to explore and analyze numerous aspects of her body-landscape. If Semenya cannot speak for herself, and years of scrutiny have not lead to any conclusive decisions about Semenya’s qualification to compete amongst women, what will settle this on-going debate?

Semenya's body defies the categories delineated by the conceptualization of sex and gender as binary, thereby causing rupture that opened a space in which how sex and gender are defined could be discussed. The many readings of Semenya's body-landscape suggest that sex and gender are multi-layered concepts which can be understood in a multiplicity of ways. However, to use Semenya's body-landscape as a space to explore the definitions of sex and gender, without granting Semenya herself the opportunity to contribute to the discourse, denies the very person that is most affected by this discourse the ability to claim their own identity. In response to a journalists' inquiry following Semenya's 2009 race, her coach responded, "Sometimes you look at somebody thinking he is O.K.... But you find out in his heart, maybe it is complaining. I can't see what's happening in her heart" (Levy). Regardless of the amount of scrutiny, reading Semenya's body-landscape will always provide an incomplete picture of her identity as long as Semenya herself is not granted the space to voice to her experience within the rigidly binary structure of international competitive athletics. The current concepts of sex and gender must be deconstructed in order to make room for the participation and exceptional achievements of athletes of all sex and gender identities. Furthermore, as Mandela once stated, "Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire, the power to united people that little else has." If the space of international professional athletics can be reimagined to be more inclusive, it will challenge the boundaries other binary-bound spaces beyond the scope of sport.

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